


Marilynn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn.
*Myth, Montage, & Visuality in Late Medieval
Manuscript Culture: Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea.*
University of Michigan Press, 2003. pp. v + 344.

arilynn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn successfully conduct a cross-disciplinary reading of one of Christine de Pizan's major prose works, the *Epistre Othea* (1400) by creating a theoretical framework, which is informed by art history as well as current performance and cinema theories. Their contribution is a fine example of how postmodern approaches to literature, culture, and the visual arts can be applied to texts of the past, in this case, the late Middle Ages. The Burgundian court in the reign of Philip the Good (1419-67), whose predecessors Philip the Bold (1364-1404) and John the Fearless (1404-19) were Christine's patrons, was a center for the production of luxury manuscripts including copies of the *Epistre Othea*. With more than 100 miniatures, the *Othea* is aptly suited to further our understanding of the power and centrality of visual imagery in late medieval manuscript culture.

The purpose of this book is to evidence the revisionist nature of Christine de Pizan's iconographic program in the *Epistre Othea* with regards to her sources such as the *Roman de la rose*, the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, the *Ovide moralisé*, and Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. Desmond and Sheingorn shed new light on an already well-documented topic by approaching it from the angle of iconography and by analyzing the implications of iconographic arrangement or bricolage, as Claude Lévi-Strauss calls the process of remythologization, and visual content for reading/viewing and the reception of a given text.

The *Epistre Othea* is schematically constructed in a tripartite division of *texte*, *glose*, *allegorie*, where the *texte* is enunciated by the goddess Othea addressing her pupil Hector. Christine's authorial voice pronounces the *glose*

and the *allegorie*, and provides explanatory commentary on Othea's message. The numerous miniatures reinforce the narrative structure, but, and this is one of the authors' central arguments, they are not meant to be read as a progressive pictorial narrative. Instead, the disjointed and fragmented arrangement of the images places the onus of performativity, assembling the images montage-like, on the reader/viewer. The authors convincingly show that it is because of the nature of this visual arrangement that Aby Warburg's montages of images as portrayed primarily in his *Mnemosyne*, which also require the "creativity of the spectator" (31), provides a more useful approach than does Panofsky's iconographic theory. The juxtaposition of Panofsky's and Warburg's cinematic theories is the topic of the first chapter "Cinematic Experiences: Iconography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The following four chapters offer in-depth studies of Christine's revisionist iconographic practices. In Chapter 2, "Constructing

Masculinities," the authors undertake a reading of certain miniatures in the Duke's (BnF fr.ms 606) and Queen's (BL Harley 4431) manuscripts of the *Othea* in the context of the quarrel about the *Roman de la rose*, which preceded the composition of these manuscripts. The illustrations of some of the central myths of the *Rose*, such as the castration of Saturn by his son Jupiter, or the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion are read in the context of homoeroticism, male subjectivity, and chivalric conduct concluding that, in the *Othea*, Christine proposes a lengthy commentary on heteronormative masculinity in her effort to continue her critique of the *Roman de la rose*. It must be mentioned that the *Rose* manuscripts in question (Douce 371 and València MS 387) deviate from Meredith McMunn's earlier findings in five manuscripts which Christine may have seen ("Programs of Illustration in Roman de la rose Manuscripts Owned by Patrons and Friends of Christine de Pizan," *Au champ des escriptures. IIIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, ed. Eric

Hicks et al., Paris: Champion, 2000, 737-58). This is based on the argument that McMunn "[does] not take into account the dynamic context in which Rose manuscripts were being produced while the letters in the *querelle* were circulating" (51; n. 15). In the next chapter, "Envisioning Desire," the authors continue to explore the instability of heterosexuality for men and women, this time by reading certain mythological miniatures against the *Ovide moralisé*. This is followed in Chapter 4, "Engendering Violence," by an analysis of miniatures in the Duke's and the Queen's manuscripts where physically and/or emotionally violent acts are depicted as revisionist commentaries on the *Histoire ancienne*. The last chapter focuses on the importance of gestures as part of nonverbal communication. The argument here hinges on the gendered performativity of gestures, which lend emotions a rhetorical efficacy that verbally expressed emotions might lack.

In the Afterword, the authors expand their chronological scope to the work's reception in the 15th and 16th centuries when

various printed editions and translations appeared. However, a reduction in the quality of the images and the exactness of the text-image relationship is clearly noticeable as attention to detail wanes with the use of woodcuts. Nevertheless, as the authors conclude, "[t]he manuscripts, printed books, and translations that make up the reception history of the Othea testify to the continued appeal of this text for more than a century after its original composition" (241). Furthermore, the montage quality of this work seems to speak to diverse cultural contexts as the images continue to generate visual meaning that remains legible and eloquent. As is fitting for a work on iconography, the authors illustrate their arguments richly with numerous visual examples from the manuscripts in question. The peripheral material includes detailed notes and an extensive bibliography as well as a general index.

Desmond and Sheingorn continue the exploration of a relatively new field in Christine studies, i.e., the interface between text and image and the contextual and

mythological relationship between the miniatures of a single text and then, by extension, across her oeuvre. In this sense, this work wonderfully dovetails with and complements Sandra Hindman's earlier contribution to manuscript production, *Christine de Pizan's "Epistre Othéa": Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI*, which focuses more on socio-political contexts than on postmodern cinema and performance theories.

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"A constrictive for the vagina so that they may appear as if they were virgins. Take the white of eggs and mix them with water in which pennyroyal and hot herbs of this kind have been cooked, and with a new linen cloth dipped in it, place it in the vagina two or three times a day. And if she urinates at night, put it in again. And note that prior to this the vagina ought to be washed well with the same warm water with which these things were mixed."

□ "A Good Constrictive," in the *Trotula*.